

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bill Duke

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Duke, Bill, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke,
Dates:	November 20, 2019 and September 19, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008 and 2019
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:39:48).
Abstract:	Film director and actor Bill Duke (1943-) has over 100 directing and acting credits, including for directing American Playhouse, A Rage in Harlem, and Sister Act 2, and acting in Fastlane, Commando, Predator, Menace II Society, and X-Men: The Last Stand. Duke was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 20, 2019 and September 19, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_115
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Film director and actor Bill Duke was born William Henry Hudson Duke, Jr. on February 26, 1943 in Poughkeepsie, New York to Ethel Louise and William Henry Hudson Duke, Sr. Duke earned his A.A. degree from Dutchess Community College before attending Boston University, where he originally enrolled as a pre-med student, but earned his B.A. degree in theatre. He received his M.A. degree in fine arts from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Duke later attended the American Film Institute.

Duke began his career as an actor in New York City with the Negro Ensemble Company, performing in plays such as LeRoi Jones' *Slave Ship* and Melvin Van Peebles' musical *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*. Duke's first movie role was in 1976 when he portrayed a young Black Muslim revolutionary named Abdullah Mohammed Akbar in *Car Wash*. Duke then held the recurring role of Luther Freeman in the series *Palmerstown, U.S.A.* before his directorial debut in 1982, directing episodes of *Knot's Landing*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Flamingo Road*. Some of Duke's most prominent work was his direction of teleplays for the PBS series *American Playhouse* including "The Killing Floor," which was chosen for Critic's Week at the Cannes Film Festival in 1985, "A Raisin in the Sun," which received an Emmy nomination, and "The Meeting." During the 1980s, Duke amassed more than 100 television directing credits, including more than seventy episodes of roughly twenty television series such as *Miami Vice*, *Dallas*, *Crime Story*, *Cagney and Lacey* and *Hill Street Blues*. Duke directed his first feature film in 1990, a film adaptation of Chester Himes' novel *A Rage in Harlem*. He went on to direct many other films including *Deep Cover*, *Sister Act 2*, *Hoodlum*, *Deacons for Defense*, and *Prince Among Slaves*. Duke was also featured in numerous television series, including in *Fastlane*, *Karen Sisco*, and *Black Lightning*, as well as in films like *Predator*, *Menace II Society*, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, and *High Flying Bird*. In 1993, he co-authored *Black Light: The African American Hero* with Paul Carter Harrison and Danny Glover; and, in 1996, he published *The Journey: A Tale of Human Healing*. Duke published his memoir in 2018.

In 2004, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Duke to the California Film Commission. Duke also worked with non-profit and charity organizations such as Educating Young Minds, and has taught at several universities including Howard University and New York University School of Arts. In 2008, he founded the Duke Media Foundation, aimed at teaching new media skills to youth.

Duke is the recipient of numerous awards including the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award, the NAACP's Special Award for Outstanding Achievement, SCLC's Drum Major for Justice Film Award, and a Cable Ace Award. President Bill Clinton also appointed Duke to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Duke was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 19, 2008 and November 20, 2019.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bill Duke was conducted by Harriette Cole and Larry Crowe on November 20, 2019 and September 19, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Film director and actor Bill Duke (1943-) has over 100 directing and acting credits, including for directing American Playhouse, A Rage in Harlem, and Sister Act 2, and acting in Fastlane, Commando, Predator, Menace II Society, and X-Men: The Last Stand.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Duke, Bill, 1943-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Duke, Bill, 1943---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actor

Film Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, November 20, 2019 and September 19, 2008. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The

HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_001_001, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Bill Duke was born on February 26, 1943 in Poughkeepsie, New York to Ethel Douglas Duke and William Duke, Sr. His maternal great-grandfather was a leader in the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians near West Point, Mississippi, where Duke's mother was born in 1911. Duke's maternal grandfather, who was African American, owned a large farm there, until he was forced to cede his land to a white neighbor who accused him of allowing his cows to destroy the neighbor's corn. He moved his family to Poughkeepsie, where Duke's mother worked as a domestic and nurse's aide. Duke's paternal ancestors were landowners in Orange, Virginia, where Duke's father was born in the early 1910s. Upon moving to Poughkeepsie, he obtained a position at the De Laval Separator Company, and ascended the ranks. Duke's parents met at Poughkeepsie's Ebenezer Baptist Church. As a child, Duke was influenced by his father's high expectations. He also remembers spending time with his sister, Yvonne Duke Hampton, in the attic of his family's home.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Bill Duke grew up on his family's land in Poughkeepsie, New York, where they cured pork, canned produce and made ice cream. In Poughkeepsie, Duke was active in the youth programs at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and began his education at the mostly white Violet Avenue Elementary School. He struggled with dyslexia at the time, although he was not diagnosed until later in life. He went on to attend Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School in Hyde Park, New York, where he began writing poetry. A teacher discovered Duke's writing after confiscating his notebook, and entered him in a national poetry contest. Later, Duke earned an associate's degree at Poughkeepsie's Dutchess Community College, and was awarded Boston University's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship. Duke nearly left school due to financial difficulties, but continued with help from James Hall, the president of Dutchess Community College. Duke then changed his major from pre-medicine to English, and auditioned for theatre director Lloyd Richards.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Bill Duke developed his observation skills as a child, on outings with his father in Poughkeepsie, New York. Later, Duke attended Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts, where he auditioned for theatre director Lloyd Richards, who taught drama. Upon graduating, Duke matriculated at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts; and, with Richards' help, secured a role in Douglas Turner Ward's 'Day of Absence' with the Negro Ensemble Company. Duke also began writing, directing and producing his own and others' plays at theaters like La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and The Public Theater. Then, Duke moved to Los Angeles, California to work as Richards' assistant on his film, 'The Gold Watch.' Duke became well-known in Hollywood, and starred in films like 'Car Wash' in 1976, and 'American Gigolo' in 1980. Duke then directed 'The Hero.' While the film was a success, Duke struggled to find further work as a director, until television writer David Jacobs invited him to direct an episode of 'Knots Landing.'

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_001_004, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Bill Duke honed his skills as a director on television shows like ‘Knots Landing’ and ‘Falcon Crest’ in the early 1980s. For the PBS series ‘American Playhouse,’ Duke directed “The Killing Floor,” set in the Chicago stockyards; “A Raisin in the Sun,” starring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle; and “The Meeting,” written by Jeff Stetson. Duke also continued to act, and played Arnold Schwarzenegger’s adversary in ‘Commando’ in 1985, and then his friend in ‘Predator’ in 1987. In the early 1990s, Duke directed renowned actors Forest Whitaker, Danny Glover and Robin Givens in ‘A Rage in Harlem,’ which was based on Chester Himes’ novel of the same name. Then, for New Line Cinema, he directed ‘Deep Cover,’ which featured the eponymous song by Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre. Duke shares his directorial philosophy, and talks about the difference between acting and directing, which he believed to involve greater accountability. He also lists his favorite actors, including Charlize Theron, Bette Davis and Laurence Fishburne.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_001_005, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Bill Duke appeared in the Hughes brothers’ film, ‘Menace II Society,’ based on Los Angeles’ gang culture. In the mid-1990s, he directed ‘America’s Dream,’ and then ‘Hoodlum,’ starring Laurence Fishburne and Tim Roth. With Danny Glover and Paul Carter Harrison, Duke published ‘Black Light: The African American Hero,’ which profiled prominent African Americans through text and photography. Duke also directed Forest Whitaker and Ossie Davis in ‘Deacons for Defense,’ a film about the Deacons for Defense and Justice organization. In the 2000s, Duke taught at Howard University’s Department of Radio, Television and Film; served on the National Endowment for the Arts board and the California Film Commission; and founded the Duke Media Foundation. He also earned a master’s degree from the Center for Advanced Film Studies at Greystone, and advocated for youth education and HIV/AIDS awareness. Duke reflects upon his concerns for the black community, as well as his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_002_006, TRT: 6:30:38 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_002_007, TRT: 7:29:35 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Bill Duke, Section A2008_115_002_008, TRT: 8:13:25 ?